

Muslim Immigrants in the United States

By Daniel Pipes and Khalid Durán

Our bookshelves groan under the weight of books bearing titles like *Islam and the West*, *The Future of Islam and the West*, and *The Islamic World and the West*. What is striking about these books — all quite recently written and published — is the anachronism of their geographic premise. With millions of Muslims now living in North America and Western Europe, the old dichotomy of Islam and the West exists no more. This presence of Muslims in the West has profound significance for both civilizations involved, Western and Islamic, and it has a potential for both good and ill. Indeed, looking ahead, it is hard to see any other cultural interaction quite so fraught with implications.

This *Backgrounder* focuses in on just one portion of Western Islam, namely those Muslims who live in the United States and who are either immigrants or their descendants (hereafter referred to as “Muslim immigrants”). It does not deal with the other major component, the converts; nor does it deal with other Western countries.

Demography and Geography

The first challenge in studying Muslim immigrants in the United States is counting them. By law, the U.S. Census Bureau cannot count adherents of a religion and Muslims are too few to show up reliably in most survey research.

In addition, there are questions about whom to count (do Ahmadis, legally not considered Muslims in Pakistan, count as Muslims in the United States?). Taking these and other complications into account, a statistical picture is emerging that points to a total Muslim population in the United States of about three million, of which immigrants make up two-thirds to three-quarters.

Accepting that this number is necessarily rough, it does point to somewhat over two million

Muslim immigrants, or slightly less than one percent of the U.S. national population.

Immigrant Muslims are ethnically extremely varied, coming from virtually every country where Muslims live, or well over 100 countries in all. Symbolic of this diversity, Los Angeles alone boasts such exotic food fare as the Chinese Islamic Restaurant and the Thai Islamic Restaurant. The largest numbers of immigrants derive from three main sources: South Asia, Iran, and the Arabic-speaking countries. The single largest group of Muslim immigrants is from South Asia (meaning Bangladesh, India, and Pakistan). They are followed by perhaps 300,000 Iranians and 600,000 from the Arab countries. Shi'is, who make up about 10 percent of the worldwide Muslim population, probably make up about the same percentage of the U.S. Muslim population.

Like most immigrant communities, Muslims are considerably younger than the national average and heavily weighted toward males. Indeed, Islam is the most male religion in the United States, with roughly two men for every woman. There are many reasons for this imbalance, some of them concerning the mostly African-American convert population, others having to do with the general immigrant pattern of men moving to an area before women follow them. There are many other reasons having to do with the specifics of Muslim immigration; for example, thousands of former soldiers of the Iraqi army who defected were settled in the United States. Birth rates for immigrant Muslims start very high, then drop as they Westernize.

Muslims tend to live in the major metropolitan areas where immigrants historically have congregated, including the country's largest cities (New York, Los Angeles, Chicago). More broadly, the Islamic map of the United States features four major regions, all urban: the New York to Washington area; California, especially Los Angeles and San Francisco;



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a triangle stretching from Chicago to Cleveland to Detroit; and Texas, especially the Houston and Dallas-Fort Worth areas. The southeast and northwest portions of the country have the fewest Muslim immigrants, with the exceptions of southern Florida and the Seattle area.

Many of these centers have a specific ethnic quality. California has especially many Iranians. Los Angeles may have the second-largest Iranian population of any city after Tehran. Texas has a majority of South Asians. The Midwestern triangle has mostly Arabs and American blacks, though Chicago has a near-plurality of East Europeans (Albanians, Bosnians, Turks). Detroit has the country's largest concentration of Arabs (mostly Lebanese, Iraqis, Palestinians, and Yemenis), a legacy of the days when Henry Ford employed Lebanese laborers.

Unlike the Muslim immigrants in Europe who live in ghetto-like areas, Muslim immigrants to the United States are highly dispersed. The only town in the country with a substantial concentration of Muslim immigrants is Dearborn, Mich., where they make up perhaps 30 percent of the population; and one part of Dearborn, called Southend, is about 97 percent Muslim. In contrast, efforts at Muslim-only towns (such as Baladullah, a Muslim enclave in the Sierra Nevada foothills of California) consist mainly of African-American converts to Islam.

Immigration History

The earliest Muslim immigrants came as slaves from Africa beginning perhaps as early as 1501. Their absolute numbers are open to substantial disagreement, with one foremost scholar, Allan D. Austin, putting their number at 40,000¹ (for the United States alone) and another, Sylviane Diouf, estimating 2.25 and 3 million (for the Americas as a whole).² The slave-owners sometimes appreciated and rewarded their literate Muslim slaves but they despised the religion of Islam and did what they could to prevent it from passing from one generation to the next. As a result, except in vestigial forms (one group of Trinidadian Baptists engage in practices to the present that recall Islamic ritual), the religion disappeared by the 1860s, or two generations after the import of slaves ceased.

The first free Muslim immigrants may date back to the later 16th century, when captured Muslim soldiers were deposited on the coast of North Carolina and elsewhere in the South; if so, then the Melungeons, swarthy whites living on the Cumberland Plateau in

remote parts of the southeastern United States, from Virginia to Kentucky, may be their descendants.

The modern history of Muslim immigration to the United States began a decade or so after the Civil War, consisting mostly of Levantines but also a few from Yemen, South Asia, Indonesia, and elsewhere. For example, some 700 Punjabi farmers, some of them Muslims, emigrated from India to California. This second wave of immigration lasted, with numerical ups and downs, until 1924, when the door to non-European immigration clanged nearly shut. Over the next 40 years, the few Muslim immigrants tended to be Soviet-bloc refugees who arrived in the aftermath of World War II. By the time of the landmark 1965 change in the immigration law, about 100,000 to 150,000 Muslims lived in the United States.

That 1965 legislation imitated the third wave of immigration, which continues to the present. Opening the doors to immigrants from the entire world, it put a premium more on skills and family ties than on provenance. Indeed, with time, making the U.S. population more diverse became a goal in itself, as symbolized by the lotteries, starting in 1989, which gave a chance to anyone around the world to come to the United States with his immediate family.

Accordingly, the numbers of Muslim immigrants began to increase rapidly starting in the late 1960s. Recent analysis completed by the Center for Immigration Studies shows that, among countries with large Muslim populations, Pakistan is by far the leading sending country of immigrants over the last decade, followed by Bangladesh, Iran, Iraq, Turkey, and Egypt.³

Reasons for Immigrating

Muslims since 1965 have arrived in the United States for three main reasons:

(1) **Refuge.** Tragic events in predominantly Muslim countries often lead directly to the emergence of a Muslim ethnic community in the United States; Afghanistan and Iraq offer particularly stark examples. The fact that Muslim countries are disproportionately dominated by dictators means that tyranny, persecution, poverty, violent regime changes, civil strife, and wars have driven some of the most talented and wealthy from Muslim countries in the Middle East, South Asia, and beyond. Some examples by category:

- *Ethnic persecution.* Expulsion of Asians from Uganda, followed by smaller numbers from

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Tanzania and Kenya, led to some 6,000 Muslims arriving in North America. Saddam Husayn's extermination campaign against the Kurds led to mass exoduses in 1989, 1991, and 1996.

- *Religious persecution.* Hindu-Muslim clashes in India cause a steady stream of Muslims to seek safety in America, even as members of the country's elite leave due to job discrimination. There was even one case of a French Muslim seeking asylum in the United States.
- *Islamism.* Members of the Ahmadi sect fled Pakistan when their faith was deemed not Islamic in 1974, as did many other Muslims running from the Islamist (or Islamic fundamentalist) dictatorship of General Zia ul-Haq. The Iranian revolution of 1979 targeted the sort of person most likely to seek refuge in the United States. Persecuted by Islamists, members of anti-Islamist movements such as the Republican Brothers of the Sudan and the Association of Islamic Charitable Projects of Lebanon, immigrated to the United States.
- *Anti-Islamism.* Conversely, Islamists flee repression from countries such as Algeria, Egypt, Lebanon, and India by moving to the land of the infidel, where they (ironically) find the freedom to express their views.
- *Civil wars.* Waves of immigrants arrived as a consequence of the endless civil war in Sudan, the 1971 Pakistani civil war, the 1975-90 Lebanese civil war, the 1990s anarchy in Somalia and the former Yugoslavia.
- *International wars.* The Israeli victories in 1948-49 and 1967 caused waves of emigration. The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in December 1979 and the decade of warfare that followed prompted the educated to flee. The Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1990 brought not only Kuwaiti citizens and residents, but also 10,000 Iraqis, one-third of them soldiers (and their family members) who surrendered to the Allied troops and could not be sent back without imperiling their lives. With the Muslim world dominated by dictators, it seems unlikely that this flow will end or even lessen any time soon.

(2) Education. By the 1990s, U.S. colleges and universities attracted over half a million foreign students, many of whom chose to remain in the United States, where facilities for their profession are superior, political freedoms wider, and economic rewards greater. Among medical students, more than 75 percent — and perhaps as many as 90 percent — end up staying in the United States. Female students are also particularly inclined to stay; they appreciate the independence, self-sufficiency, and opportunities for assertiveness the United States offers them and know that to return means having to conform to restrictive ways, demure behavior, and family dictates.

(3) Islamist Ambitions. Although the numbers in this category are smaller than refugees or students (and indeed, some Islamists also fit in those two capacities), Islamists have particular importance, for they harbor religious and political ambitions that are in a potential collision course with the majority population.

Islamists arrive in the United States despising the country and all it represents, intending to make converts, exploit the freedoms and rights granted them, and build a movement that will effect basic changes in the country's way of life and its government. The superpower status of the United States makes it especially attractive to those who wish to change the world order; what better place to start? Islamists do not accept the United States as it is but want to change it into a majority Muslim country where the Qur'an replaces the Constitution. "Our plan is, we are going to conquer America," is how a missionary put it already in the 1920s.⁴ His latter-day successors are no less ambitious. They have two alternate strategies, non-violent (i.e., conversion of the Christian majority) and violent (i.e., jihad), to accomplish this.

Islamists also find several other advantages to a U.S. residency: Freedom of expression that permits them to write or broadcast whatever they wish. Good communications and transportation allow the Islamists to stay in constant touch with their movements. There is no country as open to outside actors or influences as the United States. Also, American affluence offers many opportunities to raise funds.

But it's not a complete paradise, especially if the Islamists engage in illegal activities. Omar Abdel Rahman, the blind sheikh spending the rest of his life in a U.S. jail for his part in attempting to blow up New York City landmarks, finds things less than ideal in the United States: "I came here to smell freedom; I found it to be suffocating here."⁵ Since September 2001,

groups (such as the Global Relief Foundation) and individuals (such as Enaan Arnaout, head of the Benevolence International Foundation) who hitherto found the U.S. a playground for dubious behavior have suddenly found themselves caught up with the law.

Once in the United States, temporary sojourns often turn into permanent residence. Workers get accustomed to higher incomes, students stay on beyond their schooling, and intellectuals appreciate the freedom of expression. In general, families stay more than singles, women more than men, educated and skilled individuals more than those who are not, rich ones more than poor ones, and economic refugees more than political ones. There is a growing sense among immigrant Muslims that the home countries are fated to remain politically unfree and economically backward; not surprisingly, they see the United States as a permanent abode.

Religious Practice

Do immigrants become more religious or less so on arrival in the United States? Both. Those who embrace the freedoms America offers and become religiously less observant (or even convert out of Islam), are acting out what they could not fully express in the home countries. In contrast, about one-third of Muslim immigrants say they have become more religious in the United States. Their increased piety has two main sources, cultural and moral. On the cultural level, immigrants respond to the strangeness of a new land by emphasizing familiar rituals and spending time at the mosque. On the moral level, they respond to the radical openness of American life by emphasizing their hitherto neglected faith (“When I came to America, I really became a Muslim. Back home, I took it for granted”).⁶

Survey research indicates that the numbers of those who live in some fashion by the laws of Islam are about equal in numbers to those who do not.⁷ Such numbers may be deceptive, however, for Muslims tend to overstate their piety. Perhaps half of the Muslims restrict themselves to halal meat. A third of the women obey the injunction against wearing makeup in public and roughly the same number avoid shaking hands with a member of the opposite sex who is not related to them. A smaller number, 20 to 25 percent of schoolgirls, cover their hair. Prayers are less common; no more than 10 percent of those with access to mosques attend Friday prayer services. The consumption of alcohol is widespread. The prohibition of extramarital sex is commonly violated, especially by young men who tend to see non-Muslim women as fair game.

Socio-Economic Status

Muslim immigrants of recent years boast exceptionally high levels of education. A 1999 survey found that 52 percent of them have a graduate degree.⁸ South Asians appear to be the best educated of all. Exceptions to this pattern do exist, of course: Yemeni farmers, Iraqi soldiers, and most illegal immigrants are far less educated. The relatively high level of education results in part from the Muslim community in North America drawing disproportionately from the elites. Very often it is the best-educated who come to settle in the United States or Canada.

Immigrant Muslims tend to concentrate in the professional and entrepreneurial vocations, and especially in engineering and medicine, which jointly employ about one-third of Muslims in the United States. With such high educational levels, it comes as no surprise that many members of this community have done well; average income for Muslims appears to be higher than the U.S. national average. Although new, the community boasts a significant number of millionaires as well as many other accomplished individuals (including one Nobel Prize winner in chemistry, Ahmed H. Zewail, and such notables as the movie actor Omar Sharif, the professional basketball player Hakeem Olajuwon, and the model Iman). Muslim Americans proudly say that theirs is “the richest Muslim society on Earth,”⁹ and they are right; more than that, it may be the most accomplished.

Intra-Muslim Tensions

America constitutes a microcosm of the Muslim world, with multiple nationalities present as well as elements of Islam’s entire cultural, racial, and sectarian diversity. Thrown together, these peoples discover the differences that lie below the surface of their common faith. Much of this is due to differences in custom. Turks put up gravestones and decorate them with laminated photographs of the deceased; Saudis see gravestones (even without pictures) as a form of idolatry and deem photographs even worse. Because they speak the language of the Qur’an, Arabs sometimes display an impatience bordering on arrogance toward the Islamic practices of non-Arabs. The result is intra-Muslim bias.

“Muslim parents do not mind their son marrying a white American girl, but they would object if he married a Muslim girl of a different school of thought (Shi’i/Sunni), or different tribe, like Punjabi, Sindhi, Pathan, Arab vs. non-Arab, Afro-American vs.

immigrant, or different class, Syed vs. non-Syed,” observes a writer in *Pakistan Link*.¹⁰

Politics fuels animosities. Iranians and Iraqis have not forgotten their long and bloody war from 1980 to 1988, nor have Kuwaitis forgiven Iraq's 1990-91 occupation of their country. Saudis and other Gulf Arabs are disliked for the way they treat Muslim workers in their countries.

Religiosity is another issue. Are mosques to be moderate or Islamist? Many institutions are roiled with confrontations along these lines. The most public such dispute has taken place weekly for nearly two decades in front of the Islamic Center in Washington, on the sidewalk of a major avenue. The conflict between Sunnis and Shi'is, which goes back to the first years of the Islamic religion, still has great force. Shi'is have their own mosques and rarely socialize with Sunnis.

Then there are the enduring tensions with American converts to Islam, who are overwhelmingly African-American. Their enormously different backgrounds cause the two groups — immigrants and natives, foreigners and Americans, Muslims born and re-born — not always to get along well. As one convert puts it, “proselytes almost always complain of the terrible frustration they endure as they struggle to adjust to their new religious community.”¹¹

Children

Muslim immigrants widely see a range of American customs touching on family relations and the position of women as morally corrupt and endangering their way of life. Their worries include family honor, divorce, abandonment of faith, and intermarriage.

To Muslim parents, children must be respectful, honest, modest, and hard working. In contrast, they see American children as disrespectful, indulgent, proud, and unwilling to work. Many Muslim parents send their children to Islamic schools to control the moral tone of the classroom. Some students find Islamic schools a attractive, for they no longer stick out. And yet, Islamic schools do not always isolate Muslim children from the rest of society or solve the problem of peer pressure.

Muslim students are known to hide their families' religious values: Ramadan fasting becomes a diet to lose weight, while not going to the mall is a matter of baby-sitting duties. Some girls leave home wearing the loose-fitting clothes their parents require but carry something tighter to change into on reaching school. The daughter of a Palestinian family attends an Islamic

school, where she wears long dresses and *hijab* (head scarf) and sits separate from the boys. But the *hijab* comes off as soon as she's out of school.

The opposite pattern also exists. In recent years, during the revival of Islam, children of unobservant parents found a range of attractions in Islam — morality, discipline, even plain old-fashionedness. The younger generation rediscovers Islam as the religion of its heritage and takes it up with various degrees of strictness. It's not a simple duality, with parents on one side and children on the other.

Sexual Activity and Tensions

Separation of the sexes follows from the assumption that if men and women are allowed to mingle, they will indiscriminately engage in sex, thereby disrupting society. Only in the “modern and enlightened” Muslim family do man and woman meet each other before marriage.¹² Fortunately, the two styles can co-exist, though with difficulty, and American Muslims are evolving a compromise between an arranged marriage and a love marriage.

Just when Muslim girls traditionally would be separated from boys, taken out of school, and perhaps start wearing a head covering, their American counterparts begin to discover and experiment with their sexuality. To prevent such experimentation, Muslim parents seek to enforce the traditional rules and sometimes even cloistering their daughters. But the family lacks aunts and uncles to stand guard; by law, girls must go to school until 16 or so; and at 18, they acquire additional rights. Worse, at times the parents' insistence that their children live as though back in Egypt or Pakistan leads to deep tensions and even, when girls and sex are involved, to violence and death.

Still, the restrictions on meeting young Muslim women leads their male counterparts to look outside the community for companionship and sex, which leads inevitably to their getting involved with non-Muslim women and eventually marrying them. This diminishes the pool of Muslim men, leading Muslim women in turn to go out and find Christian men. A Muslim woman being forbidden to marry out, her taking a Christian husband is an act of defiance that effectively expels her from her community and sometimes even her own family, prompts more than a few of them to convert to Christianity.

To encourage the young to marry within the faith, American Muslims are developing a number of

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novel solutions, including summer camps, socials for singles, and marriage advertisements. But even these Muslim institutions have a difficult time keeping boys and girls apart.

Institutions

One scholar dates to 1982 and the founding of the Islamic Society of North America the “shift from self-imposed alienation from U.S. culture to tentative experiments at political participation.”¹³ As late as 1991, an analyst wrote that “Muslims have an inordinately small number of political organizations in contrast to other ethnic and religious groups of comparable size.”¹⁴ Since that time, a whole infrastructure of Muslim organizations have developed in the United States. They cover a wide range of concerns — religious, social, political, professional, ethnic, doctrinal.

From the outside, the major Islamic organizations resemble their Jewish counterparts, and to some extent are modeled on them. Both take up such issues as religious discrimination, inter-communal relations, and Middle Eastern policy; they sponsor testimonial dinners, conferences, and trips to Capitol Hill in Washington, D.C.; and they issue press releases, launch direct mail campaigns, take out newspaper ads, and publish periodicals.

Below the surface, however, a profound difference separates the two: whereas the Jewish institutions are conventional ethnic organizations anchored to the mainstream of American political life, the Muslim ones overwhelmingly pursue an Islamist agenda far outside that mainstream. As one moderate Muslim leader, Muhammad Hisham Kabbani, has warned, extremists have “taken over 80 percent of the mosques” in the United States;¹⁵ another moderate refers to the Islamist leaders as “swindlers” and “radicals.” The main institutions of American Islam do not represent the interests and views of the moderate Muslims who are good American citizens.

The most visible among the many Muslim organizations are those that claim to represent Muslim political interests, and especially the trio of the American Muslim Council, the Council on American-Islamic Relations, and the Muslim Public Affairs Committee. It is striking to note that all three organizations are Islamist, and so seek to forward goals deeply at variance with mainstream American principles — as well as the aspirations and concerns of a majority in the Muslim community.¹⁶

They aspire to achieve four general goals:

- Win special privileges for Islam (e.g., call for the creation of a White House Muslim advisory board);
- Intimidate and silence the opponents of militant Islam (e.g., have death edicts brought down on them, as happened to co-author Khalid Durán);
- Raise funds for, apologize for, and otherwise forward the cause of militant Islamic groups abroad, including those that engage in violence (e.g., the Holy Land Foundation, closed down for raising money “used to support the Hamas terror organization.”);¹⁷ and
- Sanitize militant Islam (e.g., promote the notion that *jihad* is not warfare but a form of moral self-improvement).

Which brings us to the subject of terrorism: Since the November 1990 assassination of Rabbi Meir Kahane by an Egyptian, the immigrant Muslim community has been associated with a great number of violent incidents — all these even before the atrocities on September 11, 2001.¹⁸ In its long history of immigration, the United States has never encountered so violent-prone and radicalized a community as the Muslims who have arrived since 1965.

Conclusion

Because the immigrant Muslim community is so new, it is still very much in formation. Which way will the first generation of immigrant children turn? Will their dual identities as Americans and Muslims be complementary or contradictory? Will they accept or reject the Islamist program of changing the United States? Will they control the urge toward violence? More broadly, will they insist on adapting the United States to Islam, or will they agree to adapt Islam to the United States? Much depends on the answer.

A few things are clear. However numerous the American converts to Islam, the immigrant community will set the tone. Fashioning a separate American Islam, away from such historic centers as Egypt and Pakistan, will be a great challenge. And both the United States and Islam are likely to be deeply affected by their mutual encounter.

End Notes

¹ Private communication, September 3, 1998. Austin reaches this number as follows: "From the total of 11,000,000+ imports of Africans in the Americas, approximately 6 percent arrived in what would become the United States (700,000+), a little more than half of these (380,000) were from West African ports from whence Muslims might have been shipped. Perhaps something more than 10 percent were Muslims hence +/-40,000."

² Diouf, Sylviane A. *Servants of Allah: African Muslims Enslaved in the Americas* (New York: New York University Press, 1998), p. 48.

³ Center for Immigration Studies analysis of public use file of Census 2000 supplemental survey.

⁴ Quoted in Andrew T. Hoffert, "The Moslem Movement in America," *The Moslem World*, 20 (1930): 309.

⁵ *Time Magazine*, October 9, 1995.

⁶ "Man From Trinidad," *New York Times*, May 4, 1993.

⁷ Haddad, Yvonne Yazbeck and Adair T. Lummis. *Islamic Values in the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), p. 25 shows 46 percent of a sample of 347. That number has probably risen in the intervening years.

⁸ Council on American-Islamic Relations. "Report Outlines Political Attitudes of American Muslims: 96 Percent Believe Muslims Should Get Involved in Local and National Politics," December 22, 1999.

⁹ Khan, Muqtedar. "The Missing Dimension," *The Message*, December 1995.

¹⁰ Athar, Shahid. "Marriage of Muslim Girls in the U.S.A.," *Pakistan Link*, August 18, 1995. Syeds (or Sayyids) are descendants of the Prophet Muhammad.

¹¹ Lang, Jeffrey. *Even Angels Ask: A Journey to Islam in America*, (Beltsville, Md.: Amana, 1418/1997), p. 38.

¹² Khan, Badruddin (pseud.). *Sex Longing and Not Belonging: A Gay Muslim's Quest for Love and Meaning* (Oakland, Calif.: Floating Lotus, 1997), p. 160.

¹³ Haddad, Yvonne Yazbeck. "Maintaining the Faith of the Fathers," in *The Development of Arab-American Identity*, Ernest McCarus, ed. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994), p. 75.

¹⁴ Johnson, Steve A. "Political Activities of Muslims in America," in Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad, ed., *The Muslims of America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), p. 117.

¹⁵ Speaking at the Department of State's Open Forum, January 7, 1999; a transcript of the talk is available at http://www.islamicsupremecouncil.org/extremism/islamic_extremism.htm

¹⁶ See Daniel Pipes, "CAIR: 'Moderate' Friends of Terror," *New York Post*, April 22, 2002 and "'Mainstream' Muslims?" *New York Post*, June 18, 2002.

¹⁷ "Remarks by the President on Financial Fight against Terror," The White House, December 4, 2001. Available on line at <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2001/12/20011204-8.html>

¹⁸ Others include: the February 1991 murder of Mustafa Shalabi in Brooklyn, NY; the January 1993 attack on CIA personnel, killing two; the February 1993 World Trade Center bombing; the March 1994 shooting at a van of Orthodox Jewish boys, killing one; the February 1997 murder atop the Empire State Building of a Danish tourist; the October 1999 crash of an EgyptAir flight near New York City, killing 217; and the July 2002 attack on the El Al counter at Los Angeles International Airport, killing two.

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